

To what extent was the Provisional Government responsible for its own downfall?

Page references:

205-222 Evans and Jenkins – “Years of Russia and the USSR”
Chapter 6 Lynch – “Reaction and Revolutions”

Overview

The **Provisional** Government which took control of Russia in February 1917 faced the fundamental problem that it had neither authority (its cabinet was moderate and had not been elected by a **Constituent Assembly**) nor power (the **Soviets** controlled the army).

These problems were not insurmountable, and the government succeeded in passing a number of radical and popular reforms in its early stages.

However, on the central issues of **Peace, Bread and Land** it failed to deliver. As a result the soldiers, the proletariat and the peasantry became disillusioned. Support rapidly grew for the revolutionary parties and in particular for the **Bolsheviks**, who promised to create a communist Utopia.

Eventually, these failures led to direct attempts to overthrow the government. In the ‘**July Days**’, the challenge came from the Left – led by Lenin; in August, from the Right – led by General **Kornilov**. Both of these particular attempts failed. Nevertheless, the fear of an effective counter-revolution from the Right saved the Bolsheviks, who finally seized power in October.

1. Fundamental problems for the government

The Provisional Government which took control of Russia in February 1917 [right] faced the fundamental problem that it had neither authority (it was not elected) nor power (the Soviets controlled the army).



(a) A lack of authority:



- **Not elected:**

The Provisional Government was, by definition, temporary. It promised to hold elections to a Constituent Assembly at the first opportunity – but with a war raging this was impossible.

- It therefore lacked real authority.

- **Not revolutionary enough (e.g. Lvov, Kerensky):**

- During its period of power, the government had two leaders:

- (a) **Prince Lvov** [left] (until July) – whose very status as a member of the nobility immediately undermined its reforming credentials, as did its members were broadly

liberal Oktobrists and Kadets, which again diluted its reforming zeal.

(b) **Alexander Kerensky** (until October) - although a popular Social Revolutionary, there was a general unease amongst the peasantry that he had 'sold out' by joining the liberals – he argued that he was just biding his time till the Constituent Assembly confirmed the SRs as the largest party.

- The make-up of the government “reflected an awareness of how far the moderate opposition had been left behind by the radicalisation of the masses” (Rogger).

(b) A lack of power (Order No. 1 and Dual Power):

Soviets controlled the railways, telegraph and postal systems and claimed to represent the “Toiling democracy” against the “Bourgeois” cabinet.

- **Order Number 1:**

Tied the army to the Soviets, stating that soldiers should only follow government orders if the Soviets gave the go-ahead.

- **Dual Power:**

- The results were “A perfect prescription for anarchy” (Ulam).
- There existed a strange situation in which the Provisional Government attempted to govern without any power and the Petrograd Soviet had all the power but refused to govern.

2. Early potential of the government

However, these problems were not insurmountable, and the government succeeded in passing a number of radical and popular reforms in its early stages. A series of decrees announced:

- A complete political and religious amnesty
- Full democratic liberties
- The abolition of the death sentence
- Confiscation of all Crown Lands
- 8 hour day, minimum wage

- **In contrast, the Soviets were held back by**

- (a) A lack of confidence, exacerbated by the fact that
- (b) Many revolutionary leaders were still at this point in exile.

- **Neither the SR's nor the Mensheviks had any desire to seize power**

- (a) SRs because they thought that the Constituent Assembly would confirm them as the largest party,
- (b) Mensheviks because they felt that the bourgeois revolution was the fulfilment of the first stage of the Marxist revolutionary process.

3. The Central Issues: Peace, Bread and Land

- Kerensky would argue later that Russia was, for a few months, the freest country in the world. But individual liberties meant little to a people suffering the privations of World War I - massive fatalities at the front, hyperinflation, transport breakdowns, empty shelves in the stores and insufficient fuel to heat their homes.

- As a result the soldiers, the proletariat and the peasantry became disillusioned. Support rapidly grew for the revolutionary parties and in particular for the Bolsheviks, who promised to create a communist utopia.

(a) Position of the Government

	What was the problem?	What did the government do?	Results / Assessment
Peace (Soldiers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Provisional Government was forced to carry on the war by Russia's allies, who threatened to cut financial assistance if she pulled out. ▪ The decision to carry on the war was not in itself unpopular at first. ▪ However, the longer it went on, the more dangerous it would become. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kerensky was made war minister and inspired the troops with great speeches. ▪ However, the publication of the Milyukov Telegram revealed that the government was still annexationist in its aims ▪ Moreover, the failure of the June 1917 Offensive discredited the government and reduced morale still further. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Riots in July led to the formation of a new government: Kerensky was appointed as Prime Minister ▪ However, he rapidly lost support too: his liberal-socialist coalition permanently squabbled. ▪ "I want to take a middle road, but no-one will help me" (Kerensky)
Bread (Proletariat)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inflation ▪ Crippled railways ▪ No grain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State monopolies ▪ New Economic Council ▪ Increased income taxes - all these measures are simply ignored. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Therefore resort to printing more money – hyperinflation: Real wages fall by 50%, bread prices triple. ▪ Mensheviks lose credibility, increase of support for Bolsheviks
Land (Peasantry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peasants expected fall of Tsar and the seizure of Crown estates to be followed by radical land reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nothing. Giving more land to the peasants now would lead to mass desertions from the front and entail massive compensation payments to the nobility which the government could not afford. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Peasantry simply seized the land anyway. ▪ Peasantry refuse to part with their grain in uncertain times – more problems in the cities

These issues were therefore linked in a vicious circle: the only way to end the economic and social crisis was to pull out of the war; but doing that would mean the withdrawal of foreign aid, which would precipitate an economic crisis of its own.

(b) Position of the Bolsheviks

• Lenin

• Lenin returned to Russia in April with German help:

He arrived in a sealed train. The Germans hoped that his presence in Russia would create further instability and ultimately lead to the country's defeat. Winston Churchill noted with awe that the Germans had let loose that "most grisly of all weapons. They had transported Lenin like a plague bacillus into Russia."

• Lenin's role was crucial in a number of respects:

- He was a brilliant orator and inspired the masses.
- His policy statements were outlined in the "April Theses" in which he promised "All Power to the Soviets" and condemned co-operation with the Provisional Government, a "Stinking corpse".
- His most important slogan was "Peace, Bread and Land".

Peace: An immediate end to hostilities.

Bread: A promise of food.

Land: All of it was to be nationalised.

- Nevertheless, the party still had less than 30,000 members, and the land policy was not particularly popular with the peasantry, who continued to support the SRs. The policies were regarded as idealistic. At the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets in June 1917, they commanded only a hundred or so of the 822 delegates.

• Trotsky

Also important, though, was the contribution of Trotsky:

- Lenin was the inspirational speaker, Trotsky was the organiser.
- He had helped to set up the St. Petersburg Soviet and now established the Red Army, a communist fighting force which soon numbered over 10,000.

4. Battle Commences

- Eventually, the failures of the Provisional Government led to direct attempts to overthrow it. In July, the challenge came from the Left – led by Lenin; in August, from the Right – led by General Kornilov. Both of these particular attempts failed. Nevertheless, the fear of an effective counter-revolution from the Right saved the Bolsheviks, who finally succeeded in seizing power in October.

(a) July Days: Round One to the Provisional Government!

The main events were as follows: ...

- The provisional government became very unpopular when the July offensive was easily defeated by Germany. The Russians were really weary of war.
- A spontaneous uprising of 500,000 soldiers, workers and sailors marched from the Kronstadt naval base to the Tauride Palace demanding the overthrow of the '10 capitalist ministers'.
- The Bolsheviks were (once again) caught by surprise and played little part in the uprising, which was crushed within days.

The government responded in the following way...

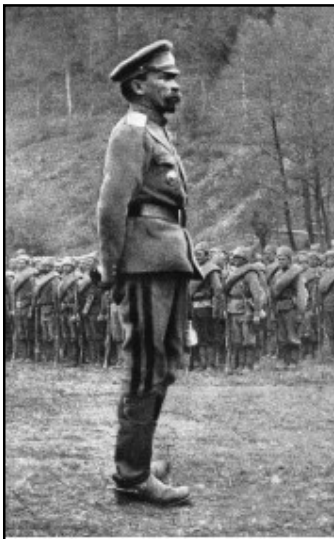
- They blamed the Bolsheviks anyway and outlawed them. Lenin was driven underground, Kamenev was imprisoned.

The results were beneficial for the government because...

- This was the lowest point for the Bolsheviks: as Fitzpatrick puts it "The whole affair damaged Bolshevik morale and Lenin's credibility as a revolutionary leader".

(b) Kornilov Affair: Round Two to the Bolsheviks!

The main events were as follows: ...



General Kornilov, discontented with the provisional government and the shambolic state of the army, called for its overthrow. He wanted a restoration of the death penalty for desertion, the abolition of the Soviets and the appointment of himself as new leader. With these objectives, he marched from the front line with his troops towards Petrograd.

The government responded in the following way: ...

Kerensky, with little popular support, initially made overtures to Kornilov by asking him to join a coalition. When rebuffed, he therefore had to ask the Petrograd Soviet to help him defend the capital. They agreed, but only once he had released Bolshevik prisoners and given them arms. He was therefore put into the unenviable position of having

to give weapons to a group of people who were determined to overthrow his regime. In the end, Kornilov surrendered without a struggle.

The results were disastrous for the government because...

Politically, it lost support on both Left and Right. The Right-Wing were appalled that Kerensky had chosen to arm the communists against a decorated soldier. The Left were appalled that Kerensky had initially tried to compromise with Kornilov and turned instead to the organisation of the Bolsheviks, the "True defenders of the Revolution" (Lenin).

Militarily, the army lost all faith in the government and started to come apart at the seams. General Alekseev resigned after praising Kornilov and stating that "Our officers are martyrs".

(c) The October Revolution: The Bolsheviks deliver the knockout blow!



The main events were as follows:

- By September, the Bolsheviks had a majority in both the Moscow and the Petrograd Soviets.
- Lenin argued that “Everything now hangs by a thread” and that delay would put the Bolsheviks at the mercy of an uncertain election, a resurgence of government support or defeat at the hands of the Germans.
- In October, the Bolsheviks decided to seize power.
- The **Petrograd Soviet**, controlled by the Bolsheviks, was used by Trotsky as the tool for seizing power. He created within it a **Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC)** and this quickly won over the support of the Peter/Paul fortress, with its 100,000 rifles.
- On **October 25th**, revolutionary troops and Red Guards methodically occupied one key point after another- the railway stations, the power station, the telephone exchange, the State Bank, the bridges over the Neva. The same evening, the **Winter Palace** was occupied and Trotsky consigned the Social Revolutionaries to “**The dustbin of history**”. It was almost bloodless.

The government responded in the following way: ...

After a failed attempt to regain control of Moscow, Kerensky fled to America.

The Bolsheviks ultimately succeeded in taking power because...

Of Trotsky’s organisational skills and Lenin’s inspirational oratory. Lenin returned the night before the seizure of power, and found that there was nothing for him to do but sit and watch the efficient execution of Trotsky’s plan

5. Conclusion

▪ For the moment, Lenin's gamble had succeeded. However, the Bolsheviks would now have to turn from their traditional aggressive, destructive stance to a constructive, defensive one. The problems which faced Lenin over the next few years demonstrated what a much more complex and formidable task that this was.

Tasks

Here are some ideas about how we could tackle the information in this pack. Discuss the benefits and limitations of each approach, and then decide as a group which task(s) to do. If you can think of any better ideas than these, please be prepared to share them!

Linking factors

The central issue that the government needed to deal with was the calling of a Constituent assembly which would deal with the issues of Peace, Bread and Land. However, the Provisional Government:

- Failed to call a constituent assembly
- Failed to end the war
- Failed to provide food
- Failed to redistribute land to the peasants

Produce a flowchart showing how these four factors connect together in a vicious circle.

Graphing

Produce an illustrated timeline graph charting the fortunes of:

- (a) The Bolsheviks
- (b) The Provisional Government

Label key dates with a description of the events going on at the time.

Discussion point: When was each at its lowest ebb?

Essay planning

After a class brainstorm, identify the four most important factors which you think led to the October Revolution of 1917.

Now produce a diagram which outlines the individual contribution of each and (more importantly) how they connect together.

To what extent was the provisional government responsible for its own downfall?

- Produce an essay plan for this title. Compare what you come up with in pairs or small groups, then compare these across the class as a whole.

Role Play / Display

Imagine that it is September 1917.

You will be given a role: a supporter of EITHER Kerensky OR Lenin OR Kornilov.

Working in groups, produce a series of posters designed to highlight the strengths of your character. Each poster should focus on a different idea, e.g.:

- Strength of your candidate's personality, weaknesses of the others;
- Praising the policies of your candidate, criticising those of his opponents;
- Stressing the legitimate authority of your candidate, and the illegitimacy of his opponents.

Construct each poster in the form of

- (a) A direct slogan in big letters
- (b) Substantiating evidence written in smaller letters underneath.